

Until the moment of their departure, despite their anxiety, the girls waited calmly without displaying their fear. But when they were in the truck and it took off in the direction of Saigon, they uttered heart-rending cries, mixed with those of their mothers.

For a moment I was afraid that the lesson I wanted to give them was too severe and that this event would cause me to lose the popularity which I had acquired among the people of Lai Thieu. To avoid being attacked by the tearful mothers, I went to Saigon and asked Lieutenant Ballet to tell the mothers that I had been obliged to do this, but that I had gone to Saigon myself to take care of them, to see that they were well treated and, if possible, to return them rapidly to their families.

I saw Major Savani. I informed him of the convoy which he was going to receive and asked him to prepare a dormitory where the girls would be properly put up for the night. I added that I intended to take them back to Lai Thieu the next afternoon.

The next day, at the end of the morning, I went to their dormitory; there was the most complete despair because, except for the women who had brought them their evening meal and breakfast in the morning, they had not seen anyone. They crowded around me and begged me to set them free and take them back to their families. I first told them that they had gotten into a difficult situation, that they were crazy to have made regular visits to men deep in the forest, and that this was not the conduct of decent girls. They protested that they had not gone there for a long time, that they were very sorry about it, and promised me never to go back there. They were certainly sincere.

I told them that I had been busy on their account since the night before, that I was doing my best to have them set free, and that I hoped to be able to do it quickly. In the afternoon the same truck which had taken them to Saigon took them back to Lai Thieu. The return was euphoric.

This small incident, which could have made me the enemy of the people, tightened our bonds.

The battalion was not content with bringing about pacification in the Lei Thieu region. It was a battalion in the General Reserve and principally placed at the disposal of the General Commandant of the Ground Forces in South Vietnam. Therefore the men had participated in all important airborne and ground operations in South Vietnam and Cambodia. We had had them ranging through the Plaine des Jenes, the plantation region, the forest zone and the plateaus of South Vietnam day and night and in every kind of weather.

Of all the operations which we conducted, I shall only mention one which was of a very special nature.

This was in March 1949. We had to jump in the middle of the Plaine des Jenes, around the cliff of Nui Trau, where a significant part of the General Staff of the South had been reported. We were to jump directly into the zone where the Command Post had been reported, while other battalions from all directions were to struggle to reach us, through the swamps, opening up the canals obstructed by the Viet Minh.

The surprise was complete; while descending by parachute I saw at my side a good peasant plowing his field with his two buffaloes. But the noise of the aircraft and the paratroopers frightened the animals who broke their miserable harnesses and ran off. I was taking off my parachute when I saw one of the two terrified buffaloes running for me at full speed with his head low. I tried to get up and run despite the harness. My loyal Surcouf, some 30 meters from me, shouted to me, "Commander, don't move!"

I stopped still and waited with a certain amount of anxiety. The buffalo grazed me and continued on its way.

In turn I turned around and yelled to the paratroopers in the jumping zone, "Don't move!"

The two buffaloes disappeared in the distance without doing any damage. Less than ten minutes after the jump, platoons and companies had regrouped in combat formation and had begun to move toward the designated objectives.

All of the objectives were achieved without meeting any great resistance. Once security measures had been taken, the houses began to be searched and the inhabitants began to be assembled. At my Command Post, rapidly installed in a modest hut, documents piled up. We had stumbled on the South Vietnamese Ministry of Supply.

Toward noon Captain Kaiser, the commander of the 4th Company, brought me a young man about twenty five years old. His bearing, the impeccable French which he used, marked him as an important leader.

"He was in the canal, camouflaged in the reeds," Kaiser told me. "I was sitting at the edge of the water when suddenly he surfaced a few steps from me, with a piece of bamboo in his mouth. Instinctively I took out my revolver, ready to use it."

"I am sure, Captain, that you are not going to fire," he said to me, without being afraid.

"Obviously," I said to him, "but come out of the water and come over to me with your hands in the air." He came without hesitating and I had him searched. He had nothing on him. I thought that he was an important leader. That is why I brought him to you."

Analysis of the files was far advanced. It really was the office of the Minister of Supply whom we had captured and, apparently, a very distinguished man could be only the minister himself.

"Sit down, Minister," I said to him without hesitating. "I am happy to meet you."

He acknowledged that he was the Minister of Supply.

"Your files are kept remarkably well. It will be easy for us to study them. I would like to know why you have gotten involved in this movement, which is not without danger; you could have very well been killed this morning, for example. As they say, you are from a good family and have probably studied in France?"

"Yes," he said to me, "at Aix-en-Provence."

"That's funny, because we could have met if you were a little older. I have known many Vietnamese students at Aix; in my day they were called Annamites. I must say that only two out of ten worked seriously. The others were bent on having a good time or simply loafing. I bet you were among the 8 who loafed."

"That's true," he said to me, "except for the baccalaureate which I got at Saigon, I was not able to get any diploma."

"So you are a failure, and that's why you are mixed up in this, hoping to make up for lost time."

"Maybe a little for that (the word "failure" had evidently touched him). But that was not the essential point. Like many of my comrades, I am fighting for the independence of my country, Vietnam."

"However, you know that France has recognized the independence of Vietnam. We are not fighting against the nationalists. Many of them are at our side. In my battalion I have a company which is entirely Vietnamese. We are fighting against the communists. Why wouldn't you come fight with us?"

"No comment" he said to me. "A few years ago perhaps. Now I have chosen my side and I can not quit it anymore."

"Today we are in the middle of your land. In three or four days we shall have to return. On the return trip we shall certainly have a number of engagements. I can neither tie you up like a sausage nor spare people to guard you safely. I have already reported that I have taken you prisoner, and I can not run a risk of you

escaping. I can only see one solution to prevent this, and tomorrow morning before we set out, I am going to have you shot. Think about it, this could be annoying for you and for me. But I do not see any other solution. At any rate, as our people say, the night brings counsel."

"You can have me shot if you want to, but I shall not come over to your side. That is a risk which I took in choosing my side. Too bad."

He replied calmly, without boasting, apparently resigned to the fate which he was facing.

"Well!" I said to him, "Under these conditions we have nothing more to say to each other. You can go back to the company of Captain Kaiser, who arrested you this morning."

He left, taken away by a paratrooper.

In the afternoon, during a minor shift, we fell into a serious ambush. The Viet Minh, surprised in the morning, had reassembled; now they were very close to us. A return would certainly be difficult.

In the evening, when the night formation had been established and my Command Post had been set up near the canal, I watched my minister about 100 meters away help several paratroopers from Kaiser's command post make their mess.

I called to him, "Hey," I said to him, "are you still ready to die at dawn tomorrow morning?"

"Yes," he said to me with a resigned air, "yes."

"I think it must be unpleasant to fall asleep thinking that you will be shot early in the morning. You have played your role well. I shall not have you shot. That makes you happy, I hope?"

"Extremely," he exclaimed.

"I only ask you for one thing; do not act like a fool trying to escape. I have placed an excellent sharpshooting paratrooper to guard you. He would not

miss you. I would be upset to see you disappear. You are worth a great deal more."

"I promise not to try anything and to help you as well as I can. For example, I can carry a radio set or something else if you want. You can trust me."

"I do trust you."

He left whistling to resume his work at Keiser's command post.

Throughout the night we were fiercely attacked by two Viet Minh battalions who were repulsed with serious losses. We had not only stumbled upon the Minister of Supply, but also on his food storehouse. We had found enormous stocks of rice and of paddy (unhusked rice).

Now nothing is more difficult to destroy than rice and paddy. I decided to take as much as possible with us. We had recovered several large junks in the canal; we first loaded our parachutes because we had to recover them on every operation because of a lack of money.

We loaded as much rice and paddy on the junks as we could. This was a respectable number of tons which the paratroopers towed for about 30 kilometers. Once again we were seriously engaged on the return route.

Finally we reached the sea at the Gulf of Siam, near the small port of Rue Gia. La Rance (name of a ship) was waiting to transport us to Saigon. We not only had parachutes and rice with us, but also the Cambodian company and especially an impressive number of pigs and chickens. I went to the commander of La Rance and asked him to take on all of the materiel, which we had painfully towed along the canal.

"I am not the commander of a pirate ship," he said indignantly. "I shall take on your parachutes and your men, but that is all."

I insisted on loading the rice, which could be considered as a prize of war and which was one of the goals of the operation. But the commander drew on his dignity as an honest sailor. He was not of the race of Surcouf and Dugay-Trouin.

When I announced this news to Captain Marchadier, the commander of the Vietnamese companies, there was almost a revolt. It took all his authority to prevent the companies from ransacking La Rance with its commander. The rice remained on the junks. Therefore it would be easy for the Vietnamese to recover it. Thus, a large part of the operation would be useless. We would certainly not win the war with officers of this ilk.

As far as the pigs and chickens were concerned, they scattered along the beach grunting and clucking.

Obviously during the crossing our contacts with the commander were among the most superficial. Anyway we were too dirty to come close to his impeccable white uniform.

Once arrived at Lai Thieu, I saw the minister again and took him to the 2nd Bureau in Saigon myself. No matter what promises were made to him, he refused to join our side and to occupy the important position which had been offered to him. Therefore he suffered the fate of all the prisoners. For my part I never heard him spoken of again.

The operations which I had conducted on my own right in the Lai Thieu sector, the activities which I had performed among the people, and the various contacts which I had made with the approval of General Boyer de Lattre had led me to meet the latter frequently. I was the leader of his paratroop battalions, and he considered me somewhat like his own property. Now, the policy which we were following went against the goals permitted by the Colonel commanding the TAPI (Airborne Troops in Indochina). For him a paratroop battalion had been especially

conceived and trained to make rapid raids into difficult sectors, to redress a compromising situation, and to let the care of the less glorious tasks of pacification to the sector troops. It was very bad use of its potential qualities to allow a paratroop battalion to take root for too long a time in the same town.

However we had brilliantly accomplished everything which was demanded of a paratroop battalion. But a paratrooper also had other qualities, qualities inherent in every French soldier, qualities of heart, gentility and adaptation which made him quickly loved by the people in the midst of whom he was called to live. These were the qualities which I forced myself to use, and to a large extent I had succeeded.

Our departure from Lei Thieu left only regrets.

The colonel was a classic military man who saw war only within the strict framework of the battle field. Any other activity seemed useless to him, idle and unworthy of a shock unit. He had studied at Saint-Cyr, and had a certificate from the War School. The knowledge which he had acquired in these schools seemed to him to be a panacea for resolving all problems faced by a military unit. For him an officer without a diploma from the War School could be only an officer of little value, scarcely worthy of interest. As for me, who had not even gone to Saint-Cyr, he considered it impossible for any ideas of interest at all to germinate in my head. He could not take them into consideration.

The notes which he had given me before departure would show the state of his mind with respect to me very well. After having criticized for a long time, they terminated in this way: "Officer of a primitive intelligence, not evolved".

Many times he had asked that my battalion be removed to break its bonds to the region where it was stationed. He set up systematic opposition to General Boyer de Lattre. Therefore this little war which was carried on around me was at my expense. On the least pretext arrests rained down on me. Some of them were perfectly justified. The fact that they were regularly removed from me by higher authority exasperated him.

General Boyer de Latour returned to France in November 1949; I was to return at the end of December. One day he summoned me.

"The Colonel is going to crush you in your files. I have followed your activities since you were my parachute battalion. I evaluated you before my departure. In order for these notes not to disappear from your file, I wrote them in myself in your campaign book. At any rate I am giving you a copy, and here it is. This may always be of use to you."

They were composed as follows.

"Excellent superior parachute officer. Has been remarkably able to adapt his battalion to the special situation in Cochinchina and has accomplished with spirit all of the missions which were entrusted to him. He has perfectly understood that our work in Indochina was a pacifying work. In addition to his war missions, he has been able to gain the confidence of the people in the sector where he was stationed, pursuing the rebels but protecting the peaceful inhabitants. High class leader, intelligent, human with a political sense. He should rapidly reach high positions in the Army."

These notes contrasted strangely with those of the colonel. In fact they canceled them out.

After Daboval had taken my letter to him, the colonel summoned me. I was hoping that the little incident could be settled in his office. He received me coldly.

Without shaking my hand, he said to me, "I am going to present your settlement to you. Listen while I read the report that I have prepared about you."

He did indeed read me a report of 14 pages in which I was not particularly flattered.

After finishing it, he said to me in an icy tone, "After hearing do you perceive in the request that you sent to the superior Commanding General?"

"Colonel I don't remember and did not always understand the report which you just read to me. If you give it to me so that I can study it peacefully, I shall be able to give you a reply."

"I don't have to give it to you! I read it to you and that should be enough for you."

"Under these conditions I request, Colonel, that my request reach its normal destination."

He reflected for a moment. Then he took four or five pages from his report and handed them to me.

"Read these pages," he said to me.

Although no voices had been raised in the office, nervous tension was approaching the limits of an explosion.

"In that case, I request permission to read them calmly some place else."

"Done," he said to me.

I went down to the office of Lieutenant-Colonel Daboval to read them. But I could not see what they could change in the situation. I slowly went back up to the colonel's office, handed the pages back to him, and said simply to him, "Colonel, I request you to forward my request to the superior Commanding General."

I saluted and left.

General Carpentier was absent; it was General Landouzy who received me.

"You have done well," he said to me, "in making this request. I know the work your battalion has done and I thank you for having invited me to your ceremonial parade. I shall be happy to preside over it. That will permit me to tell you, you and your men, the sorrow we feel in seeing you leave and the respect we have for you for the mission which you accomplished during two years in the South. It will be a good lesson for your Colonel. However, do you really want him to apologize in front of me?"

"No, General, what you have said is quite sufficient for me, especially with respect to the battalion."

However, I was happy that the French Army had some leaders as understanding as Generals Boyer de Lathre, Landouzy, later Salan and several others who have supported and encouraged those who were trying to get off the beaten path.

In relating these facts, which have little to do with relationships with the Indochina underground fighters, it is to show that every time some officers, in Indochina and later in Algeria, have tried to adapt our military methods to those of the enemy, they have run up against a systematic lack of understanding, deaf opposition on the part of most of the Army.

A routine mind, a rare narrowmindedness, lack of imagination, the certainty some have of possessing the truth without having to search for it, and the conceit of many of the higher staffs, are among many others the reasons which made us lose the war in Indochina and in Algeria.

First Part: The Implantation, 1952

Creation of the GCMA (Composite Airborne Commando Group)

On 26 December 1949 I embarked for France with my battalion after 25 months of residence and 15 years in the Far East. In reality after leaving Saint-Maixent, I had first commanded before the war a post on the China border at Tonkin; we had been the first feudal lords. Then I had been used in various functions, seven and a half years in China. From the beginning of the war in Indochina I commanded a commando of Major Ponchardier's Parachute Group. I had just spent more than two years with the 2nd BCCP (Colonial Battalion of Parachute Commandos), the first colonial parachute battalion created specifically for Indochina.

Thus I was looking forward to a change of scenery and performing, like many comrades, my next assignment in Black Africa.

But, sometime before my colonial appointment toward the end of October 1951, General Salen had Lieutenant-Colonel Grall ask me to return to Indochina, but without specifying the assignment which I would be given. "You will see," Grall had written me, "You will have a very interesting job."

I accepted and returned again to Indochina in December 1951. Before landing at the Tan Son Nhut airfield, for some reason unknown to me, the airplane turned above the Plaine des Juncs (Plain of Reeds). Standing behind the pilot I observed these immense marshes which, two years earlier, I had covered in every direction with my battalion. I recognized the spots where we had had serious engagements.

During the two years since I had left the country, the war had continued at the same pace. The Plaine des Juncs was still not pacified. Was I going to be used again in these marshes? That is what I was wondering when the aircraft landed. The door opened. At the foot of the gangway was Grall.

"Well," I said to him. "What is this for?"

"You will see," he said to me. "It's wonderful. You have done well in returning, and you won't regret it."

And thus I again put my feet on the Indochina soil! In a few moments the enthusiasm and the friendship which Grall manifested toward me had dissipated the apprehension and anxiety which had dominated me when I flew over the Plaine des Jons. While we drove off in his jeep, Grall gave me a rapid summary of the situation awaiting me.

At the beginning of 1950 the commander of the TAPI (Airborne Troops in Indochina) had the idea that perhaps certain Vietnam figures could be captured during their movement between the North and South. The TAPI had available several officers trained in England and accustomed to this type of mission. An inventory was made of them. The TAPI commander brought this possibility up at EMIFT (Ground Forces Interarmy General Staff).

Besides this the SDECE (External Documentation and Counterespionage Service) theoretically covered a group of services apparently acting without any connection, such as the Military Security, the SRO (Operational Intelligence Service) and, to a certain degree, the 5th Bureau. It was trying in vain to have a comprehensive plan of an Action Service accepted, analogous to that which was applied during the Occupation in territory occupied by the Germans.

But the United States was already becoming interested in our problems in Indochina. They offered us their assistance by way of Colonel Lansdale of the CIA, who made contact on this subject with Mr. Pignon, the High Commissioner in Indochina. Lansdale had particularly well succeeded in repressing terrorism with the President of the Philippines. By means of appropriate measures he had reestablished order.

Therefore he proposed to establish in Indochina, under his direction, an Action Service with American funds. This proposition was not acceptable. It was rejected. Lansdale returned to the United States. (He was to reappear in 1954 and play a dominant role in our eviction from Indochina). But the fact that America could provide materiel was retained.

Colonel Fourcaud, the aid to the SDECE director, Mr. Vibieze, proposed in agreement with Mr. Pignon to study the creation of an Action Service responsible for studying the problems of the minorities and of coordinating the dispersed activities of various services active in Indochina, by means of a central organ which was to be created. This organ was created under the name of DGD (General Documentation Office) and entrusted to Colonel Gracieux, who knew Indochina and the various ethnic groups perfectly.

It was then that the Americans sent a new representative to Indochina, Mr. Saint-Phalle, with the same mission as Lansdale. From Mr. Pignon he obtained an agreement according to the terms of which the Ecole Saint-Jacques School, intended to train special agents, would pass under American control and function with American staffs, and even under the American flag. But when General de Lattre arrived in Indochina in December 1950, he absolutely opposed all direct intervention of Americans in the Action Service, which he conceived of as implemented and directed by French officers.

Nevertheless General de Lattre accepted the material aid from the United States. He also accepted a special American mission of liaison to the SDECE in Indochina, headquartered at Saigon.

The first action of friendship from the Americans was to offer the Action Service, to be created in Indochina, two Dakotas, which were confiscated by the Metropolis Action Service while passing through Paris.

The Indochina Action Service was called the GCMA (Composite Airborne Commando Group). The composer of the acronym was Captain Deodat Puy-Montbrun, who had been a paratrooper in the Free French Forces. Cited 19 times and commander of the Legion of Honor at the age of 36, Puy-Montbrun was already a legendary figure in
¹
the Indochina War.

Subordinate to the DGD and thus to the SDECE, the GCMA had been branded by the base organization a troop corps and was to serve as a cover for the Action Service. The parachute uniform, considered to be too showy and too conspicuous, had been rejected for it. Likewise it had not obtained authorization to have its own insignia, like all the other troop corps.

In principle the GCMA was one of the three sections of SDECE-Indochina which included an Intelligence Service, a Protection Service and an Action Service. Its mission was patterned after that of the Action Service during the 1939-1945 war, i.e., "to create an underground; to establish sabotage teams; and to create escape routes."

It was put at the service of the Minister of State responsible for the relationships of the associated States as the High Commissioner of France in Indochina. The Minister delegated his powers to the commanding general with respect to the use of certain activities of an operational nature.

The High Commissioner, the commanding general, the SDECE delegate and the TAPI commander had to know the GCMA activities in part or in whole.

¹ Deodat Puy-Montbrun has related his adventures in "Chemins sans croix" (Roads without crosses) published by Presses de la Cite. On the birth of the CCMA, see also his article entitled "The secret ways of the counter-guerrilla", in Historia hors serie, No. 25, 1972.

Lieutenant Colonel Grall had just given up command of the 5th ECCC in order to take over the command of the EMO-EAP (Airborne Base Operational General Staff). He was given the GCMA command. In taking over this new command, he had the idea of a genius of not giving up that of the EMO-EAP.

As a matter of fact the EMO-EAP had the preparation of airborne operations as its primary mission, i.e., to scout the maximum possible number of possible jump zones. They often had to fly over the Viet zone, which was going to be the GCMA field of action. A single superior represented significant savings in assets, particularly personnel.

Like the EMO, the GCMA was to cover all of Indochina. Therefore its implantation was patterned on that of the command organization in Indochina. The GCMA General Staff was installed in Saigon. A regional representation was created in each territory, with its chief being installed with the Territorial Commander.

There were therefore:

--The RR (Regional Representation) of North Vietnam (Hanoi);

--The RR of Laos (Vientiane);

--The RR of South Vietnam (Saigon);

The RR of Central Annam (Touzane); and

The RR of the plateaus (Ban Me Thuot).

As the GCMA evolved, this organization had to become more and more complex.

As soon as I arrived in Indochina, Grall gave me the command of the RR in North Vietnam and of the EMO-EAPN.

At this time Colonel de Bollardiere was the TAPI commander. He proved that he had a very open and understanding mind, and gave us his maximum support in starting up, something always difficult.

The GCMA, like any new organization, had difficulties in finding its balance; the means given to it were always insufficient. In addition, the GCMA was created in an atmosphere of suspicion which traditional militarists have always had for special services. They do not always see their utility, and they have a tendency to see themselves alone as the real warriors. Therefore the GCMA began its mission with a shortage of means. Fortunately Colonel de Bollardiere never hesitated to give us what we were short of, without worrying about the tables of organization.

The EMO-EAP were in charge of the preparation of airborne operations, which were relatively rare. Therefore their personnel were not used full-time. Since these two organs had the same superior, their personnel were distributed according to the needs of the moment and as a function of each one's aptitudes, without worrying about military assignments.

Aerial reconnaissance, whether responding to the needs of the EMO or the GCMA, was made by the best observers. On the other hand, when an airborne operation had to be prepared, all of the EMO-GCMA personnel were used. Thus, during a single night, it was possible to construct in a sandbox the terrain where the operation would be carried out and to give all the flight officers, the paratroop officers and even the platoon leaders a complete file including numerous photographs taken from various angles of the objectives to be taken.

For this reason the GCMA's suborganization was complex. At Tonkin it depended on Colonel de Bollardiere and the FTNV (Ground Forces in North Vietnam) general commander for airborne operations, and on Grall with respect to its use. But all of the officers, whether they belonged to GCMA or EMO, were paratroopers, comrades who sought only to obtain maximum efficiency. If there were problems, it was never due to them.

Lieutenant-Colonel Grall, like every officer concerned with his career, had not wanted to become involved in the GCMA affair without a minimum of trumps.

He had said to me, "The GCMA is a risk. We can achieve enormous success at all echelons if the Command with which we are going to work understands us and helps us; but we shall fail completely if we are neither helped nor understood. That is why I retained the command of the ENO; if we do not succeed in launching the GCMA, that will be enough to keep us busy. This mission, at least in the beginning, will not be easy at Tonkin. There are some dogs, I have seen them, who will not make things easy for you. The reason for asking you to come is that you have the confidence of General Salan and of Colonel Gracieux, and that you have excellent personal relations with the colonel delegated by the SDECE, on whom we shall depend to a great degree. In addition you are an old hand in Indochina, you know the High Region and the mountaineers whom we want to bring over to our side. Therefore you have the maximum of trumps to succeed. But the implementation will take a long time and be difficult. Before you get any results, criticism will rain on you as well as on me, on the part of petty comrades who are watching us without good will and who are waiting for us at the critical points."

In order to pay the bill to the Command, which would not have agreed to lay out any significant amount of funds if it were not paid back rapidly and which could have been lost, Grall with some commandos made some raids on the coast of Tonkin and Annam. This was always profitable and spectacular.

"Objectives are not lacking, and this is what the military men love," added Grall. "I am at my best with Admiral de Querville, who commands the fleet in the Far East. I give him the possibility of utilizing the Navy. He is ecstatic. On 30 August 1951 we occupied the island of Cu Lao Ra, south of Tourane. We parachuted one company in, and then we debarked without opposition. The people (about 10,000 inhabitants) were in a lamentable condition of health, since the Viet had adopted

the habit of taking lepers there from the continent."

There Grall had stationed Captain Leger, a worthy descendant of Brittany pirates. He had become the feudal lord of the island, which he had perfectly organized. Leger had with him a lieutenant aide, about 10 noncommissioned officers and men from European troops, and 400 auxiliaries and low Vietnamese ranks, originally from the island. Grall had a Dakota strip built for them on the island. All were certified paratroopers. He had given them the most modern armament and radio equipment, that of the paratroop battalions and including 57 recoilless guns, 12.7 mm machineguns, and 60 mm and 81 mm mortars. They had three Arcachon pinasses with decks armed with 57 and 12.7 pieces, and about 20 Zodiac boats with four to ten seats and auxiliary motors. This was a real landing flotilla for raids on the coast. Their mission was to monitor the coast and intercept junks trafficking in arms from north to south and from south to north. Navigating on the shoals quite close to the shore, these junks escaped the surveillance of the national Navy patrol vessels.

"They land and pick up the agents whom we send into the interior," Grall explained to me. "They make night raids on specific objectives. Finally, they take part in all amphibious operations in contact with the commandos of the Navy, the Ground Army and the Air Force. Their main mission extends along the coast from Qui Nhon to Tourane. But the commandos take part in all important operations, from Cochinchina to Tonkin. They have respect, and are now known and appreciated by all. They do an excellent job. It's very interesting."

Opposite Then Hoa, Grall had had the little island inhabited by Eong Me occupied. There he had installed Captain Bichelot, trained in England for rapid and effective commando raids. Bichelot had begun by getting several goats which he hoped would rapidly populate the island. He had established numerous contacts with the Then Hoa catholics. He also did a good job.

Grall said to me, "This is how I count on getting the support of the Command, while waiting for you to get seriously started in the High Region. We know that the mountaineers, all of the mountaineers, regardless of the race they belong to, detest the Annamese. Means must be found to contact them, to bring them over to our side and to swing the mountain Viets who serve as concealment for them. That will be a good job. While waiting, in order to make the waiting easier for you, I shall invite you to take part in some operations on the coast. They are not lacking in interest."

That is how the month after my arrival I participated in the Cabestan operation.

"In about one year," he continued, "I shall have finished my tour and shall return to France. By that time you will have begun in Tonkin. You will come to replace me at Saigon. Here you will finish your normal tour. Then I shall return to replace you. I think this is an excellent way to wait and see what happens. The end of the war will not be tomorrow. Something is needed besides the operations which are being conducted at present. If our business goes well, and I believe it will, we shall give the Command one of its principal trumps for exiting honorably from the Indochina affair.

"You will replace Captain Dunan-Henri at Hanoi. I put him there while waiting for your arrival. He is a SDECE officer full of good qualities. But he is unknown among the paratroopers. He is too timid. You know these people: no security outside of themselves. Therefore it was not possible for him to make an impression on the paratroopers nor on the Hanoi General Staff. That you can do.

"Bollardiere will help you to the limit. Do not hesitate to ask him for everything you need; he will always help you. He is one of those rare officers who have understood what we want to do. You also have a remarkable officer in Hautier,

who knows the entire High Region by heart and all of the people from this territory who have taken refuge in Hanoi. He is your best pawn. You also have a few dummies whom I had to keep. It's up to you to get the best out of them.

"Finally, the most important point is the following. Bollardiere has finished his tour and is going to return to France in two months. Gilles is going to replace him. Now 'Eolio' (Bollardiere) is irreplaceable for us. Gilles is pure military with a certificate from the War School and a high class ribbon-wearer. I have spoken with him. He does not understand anything about our problems and, what is more serious, he does not want to understand them; they have no interest for him. A priori he is against them. He will never facilitate our mission. You have good relations with General Salan. I am sure that if Salan proposed to Bollardiere to send for his wife, he would extend for a year. In one year we shall be out of the woods: we shall have no more need for Gilles."

"I do want to see General Salan," I replied. "But you know the problem to be demonstrated to him better than I do. Let's both go."

Salan was filling in for General de Lattre, hospitalized in France.

That very evening Gilles invited us to dine. He was sure, he said, of getting the command of the TAPI two months later. De Lattre had promised it to him when Bollardiere left. No one could go against his wishes, even after his death (which occurred on 11 January 1952).

But our request ended with General Salan. Bollardiere agreed to extend and Gilles had to wait a year before taking over his command. For him this was a bitter disappointment which he took like a stone in his stomach, and which he never was able to digest. He finally learned who was responsible for his elimination from the TAPI, a temporary one to be sure. He was never to forgive us.

Actually we had made his fortune. The TAPI chief had always been a battalion distributor; he had never had any important operational command. For this reason

Gilles was to remain without a post. It was then that General Salan, who knew of his military properties, gave him the command of Na San which would make his fame.

I reached Manoï in the first days of January. This was during the Hoa Binh affair. On that day my former battalion, the 2nd EOCF, was to have parachuted into the entrenched camp. The EMO, whose command I was to take over, had prepared the operation before my arrival. Therefore I was to attend as a spectator at the point of departure of my former battalion. Reorganized in France with new staff and new enlisted men, it was completely different. Its leader had not even considered it useful to preserve the pennant which I had given him during a ceremonial parade at Vannes. He had had a completely new one made.

The same error that we had committed at the beginning of our tour in 1948, and which had cost us dearly, was about to be repeated. The aircraft loading went like a railroad loading: the first company in the first five aircraft, the 2nd in the next five, and so on, which made regrouping on the ground very drawn out.¹

I made a remark about this to Colonel de Rocquigny, who commanded the TAP (Airborne Troops) from North Vietnam.

"What would you like to do?" he asked me with an annoyed air.

I explained to him the procedure which we had developed four years before.

"You are right," he conceded. "But no one told me this. This is the way in many fields, where lessons are never drawn from the past. After five years of war we are waging it worse than in the beginning."

¹ Ordinarily an airplane is loaded in the following manner: in each airplane the first places are given to the same company; the next three seats to the Battalion Command Post; the last to the 2nd company. Thus, when they jump, the Battalion Command Post is between the two companies which are clearly separated. Regrouping on the ground, which is always a delicate operation, is greatly facilitated.

Captain Duman was happy to see me arrive. He had never dared to come to the EMO-BAP. The paratrooper staffs, old hands in Indochina, considered him an intruder. Although he had done considerable work in the judicious placing of the primary elements, he realized that his break-through had not succeeded. He was happy to surrender a command which had given him nothing but trouble.

I decided to eat at the Hanoi paratrooper mess. There I found only comrades and friends. As the commander of the EMO-BAP, I was also part of the household.

Under the direction of Captain Raffin, the EMO-BAP had done its work well: 1,500 jumping zones had been scouted in Tonkin, photographed and studied from an operational standpoint. Complete files were continuously updated. All of the sorties of the GCMA and EMO officers were put to advantage in setting up new files, verifying the existing ones, studying the terrain and, whenever it was possible to fly low enough, to make contact with the people.

Welcome at the TAPI, I was just as welcomed at the General Staff of General de Linares, especially by the chief of his General Staff, Colonel Dulac. I explained to him the general mission of the GCMA. He had understood all of its importance and promised to help me in every way. Dulac had a remarkable kindness and intelligence. Our collaboration was perfect and fruitful. He closely followed the GCMA evolution. He had understood my problems and calculated my needs even before I mentioned them to him, which was very practical.

Under the prompting of Grall and of Captain Duman, the Hundreds (this name referred less to a group of a hundred men than to the credits available to carry out the missions entrusted to the GCMA) had been posted after several months on the border of the Delta, at Tien Yen, near Mon Kay, at Pho Ba Che, at Luc Nam, at Phu Yen, at Song Thai, in the Red River valley, and at Phai Diem, opposite Thanh Hoa.

It was the latter (Phat Diem) which had most difficulties in penetrating into Thanh Hoa, which the Viets had firmly organized.

Altogether, under the command of officers and noncommissioned officers of rare qualities, the Hundreds managed to make contact with the people living on the edge of the mountain right in the Viet zone. The men who were sent there were always received very well. They people agreed to help them, and even to organize to support their activity. Thus it was relatively easy to mine the route from Lang Son to Hanoi.

But our loyal followers ended up by being discovered. After escaping the severe reprisals of the Viets, they retreated into the Delta, which cancelled out all of the results which we had achieved.

Moreover, the Hundreds performed double duty with the Intervention Commandos, established by Major Fourcade, with the mission of making rapid raids of variable depth into the Viet zone to develop a certain amount of insecurity. This is what the GCMA did on the Annam coast with the support of the Navy.

I shall not speak in detail of all of these Hundreds. They resembled one another. I shall only mention two, those of Tien Yen, installed and commanded for nearly a year by Lieutenant Dobeziès, and of Phu Yen, commanded by Lieutenant Borcard.

The Tien Yen Hundred was composed of six European noncommissioned officers, four troops, ten native noncommissioned officers and 60 to 100 parachutists of the Tho race, mainly called up again in the Cao Bang region. Its field of action was the coastal zone and the frontier from China to Lang Son. Essentially defensive, the coastal zone sector was anchored in concrete poured on the orders of General de Lattre. Therefore the sector commander was not unhappy to have a new unit which went into the field and, to a large degree, gave him intelligence.

The mission of this Hundred was as follows: to facilitate the escape of prisoners taken on RC 4 (Colonial Route 4) after the tragic evacuation of Cao Bang; to inform the Command of all Viet movements in the given sector; to harass the

Viets on RC 4 from Dinh Lap to Luc Nam and, possibly, from Lang Son to Hanoi. It should be noted that the Man minority, located in the Pho Ba Che Plateau east of RC 4, was always in favor of commando sorties and surveillance of the Route.

Lieutenant Dabedzies was then assigned to the GCMA 2nd Bureau at Saigon. He was replaced by Captain Banhiet, who had distinguished himself in the "Umbrella Peak" Battalion, the name given to the Battalion formed by Sang A Sang with the Nung mountaineers of the Mon Kay area. He had made sorties as far as the Lang Son region and several times had mined the Route from Lang Son to Hanoi. He had made contact with the Man mountaineers of the Mau Son Plateau and Chi Ma, my former post.

Banhiet performed a particularly interesting job. He lived in his Command Post at Tien Yen like the natives, who had adopted him. I received doubtful information about his conduct during the Resistance in the Lyon region. A former FTP (Snipers and Partisans) and a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Resistance, he had been given the permanent rank of Captain. New questions had been raised about his activities in France, and I had forwarded them to him. He never gave a reply.

As time went on the activities he was conducting in his sector escaped us. One day I summoned him to Hanoi to tell him that I had transferred him to Saigon. He appeared to be stunned. He asked me for a jeep to go to see a comrade at Luc Nam before his departure. Once arrived at Luc Nam, he had the barrier opened under some pretext or other and without any explanation he drove off among the Viets. I never heard of him again; I never knew the real reasons for his desertion.

Lieutenant Borcard, who performed identical work, was at Phu Yen. He had succeeded in deeply infiltrating stable elements which he used as relays during his frequent sorties. He had brought back two young peasant girls from the region whom he taught, after a year of patience and stubbornness, to use an ANGEC 9 and

to code messages. He installed them in a small store at the edge of R2/1 (Provincial Route 41) to survey the traffic. They were to be the first, in December 1953, to give the alarm about the 155 mm pieces being brought to Dien Bien Phu. According to their message this was a matter of "covered trucks transporting iron pipes into which the head of a child could fit".

His radio system was a model from every point of view. I had adopted the practice of sending him officers arriving from France for a two-week training period to put them directly into the environment before they received instructions at Cape Saint-Jacques.

This is how in my absence Lieutenant Thebault was sent directly to Borcard before I had even seen him. On my return I learned that Borcard, Thebault and the two noncommissioned officers who accompanied them had disappeared and had not returned by the deadline. For nearly a week we waited anxiously for news from them. Finally we heard that Borcard and his two noncommissioned officers had returned. Borcard was highly respected by all of the General Staff personnel who knew him well. We took a drink to celebrate the return. On this occasion, revealing my joy, I had said, "For Thebault, too bad; nobody knew him."

Two days later Thebault surfaced again and returned to Saigon. We celebrated this return as was proper. But someone told him the words that I had uttered during his disappearance. He appeared almost outraged and, as he was a sound, dynamic and frank officer, he came to ask me if it was true that I had shown such indifference on the subject of his supposed disappearance.

"It's true," I said to him, "and I do not understand why an officer of your brand would be affected by it. Every day officers are killed in Indochina. Their names scarcely appear in a report, and that does not change anything in our tempo of life. When they are comrades who are known to us, it is different; even though